## REVIEWS

## K. Hastrup: Culture and history in Mediaeval Iceland: an anthropological analysis of structure and change. 285 pp. O.U.P. 1985.

This is a revised D.Phil. thesis submitted at Oxford by a Danish social anthropologist and it explains the structure of the book since Oxford anthropology stresses language and history as well as holistic and structuralist accounts of societies. The book is divided into two parts: I – Systems of classification; II – Contours of history. The object of the first part is to portray the world-view of the Icelanders in order to account for the fall of the Freestate in 1262. This ambitious task is underpinned throughout, by anthropological insights and analysis.

It should be said straightaway that this is not a book for novices who are unfamiliar with Iceland's history, literature and mythology. Indeed, its narrow remit: 930-1262 A.D., is only likely to attract those who are keen on all things Icelandic and who already know a lot. However, for this group of people it may come as something of a revelation that it is possible to elicit so much information about the early Icelanders' concept of space and time from the records. More importantly it even becomes feasible to analyze the Icelandic kinship groups and their boundaries and show their close relationships to the social and political order. Enlightening though these analyses are, they make for tedious reading unless one is a dedicated scholar. However, one can always read selectively and this is worthwhile because there are many gems shining through the mud of dull facts.

Part II is far easier to grasp since this is an historical account of the fate of the Freestate before and after the acceptance of Christianity. I use the word 'fate' advisedly because the Icelanders had condemned themselves to eventual submission to the Norwegian crown long before Christianity arrived. Their 'fate' was their Law! Icelandic society was the Law – the Law was Iceland! It was contradictions within the Law that led to the breakdown of an independent Icelandic society. Those contradictions are not self-evident and they stem from the world-view of the Icelanders prior to and subsequent upon the arrival of the Christian world-view into their midst. Now the purpose of Part I of the book receives its full justification since it had laid down

the structural contradictions within the Icelanders' view of their world. In point of fact, the Icelanders were extremely clever at reconciling their pagan beliefs with Christian ones but that did not resolve their internal contradictions.

So, this is an account of the Icelanders with a difference. We are used to historians and saga-specialists telling us about 'old' Iceland which, let's face it, is the *most interesting* part of Iceland's history to those of us interested in the influence of Scandinavia upon Scotland. Our concern ends mainly in 1263 A.D. with the battle of Largs – exactly the year in which Iceland loses its independence and Scotland gains her freedom from Norway! Is that a pure coincidence?

The difference I mentioned above is really one of perspective. Social anthropology studies societies from within and normally from direct observation but it does ally itself with history to suggest answers to the way people lived in the past by drawing upon a vast amount of knowledge about the structure of tribal societies like the early Icelanders. Modern scholars are often hampered in their appreciation of past societies by applying modern criteria of rationality which have no place in historical times.

I am no expert in Icelandic matters but I do know something about social anthropology and I feel that Hastrup's analysis has a ring of truth about it. She may have got some of the details wrong but that is of small import since she has achieved a shift of focus to the abstract belief systems of the early Icelanders. The value of this view is that it may be used to measure the belief systems in the rest of Scandinavia and those parts of Britain affected by the Vikings.

She does raise the important issue of the relationship between history and social anthropology which is receiving added prominence nowadays in the study of the past where there are written records. This applies equally to the Greeks as it does the Scots. On a personal note, I have found that social anthropology can even help to understand the Picts where their written records cannot be conventionally deciphered!

In conclusion, it is not possible to summarize all the various insights which this book contributes to illuminate the history of Iceland. I

found it a difficult but rewarding experience which I feel will be repeated by all those who are genuinely interested in the early history of Iceland.

## Dr. Anthony Jackson.

Review: Gillian Fellows-Jensen: Scandinavian Settlement Names in the North-West. C.A. Reitzels Forlag, Copenhagen, 1985, 455p.

This is Dr. Fellows-Jensen's fourth volume in the Navnestudier series produced by the Institut for Navneforskning (Institute for Name Studies) in Copenhagen. Her latest offering, covering Scandinavian names in Cheshire, Lancashire, Westmorland, Cumberland and Dumfries-shire follows on from her Scandinavian Settlement Names in the East Midlands (No. 16, 1978), Scandinavian Settlement Names in Yorkshire (No. 11, 1972) and Scandinavian Personal Names in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire (No. 7, 1968). So she can safely be regarded as the foremost authority on the Scandinavian onomastics of England, and this present volume draws one of the Scottish counties under her critical scrutiny. Over the past few years, she has become a regular attender at our annual conferences, at which she has contributed regular papers, including one recently published in The Scandinavians in Cumbria edited by John Baldwin and Ian Whyte, the proceedings of our successful Cumbria conference in 1981.

As is to be expected, the material dealt with in this volume has been arranged in much the same way as Dr. Fellows-Jensen's previous volumes in the series. The names treated are not only the purely Scandinavian but also hybrid names and English names which have been subjected to Scandinavian linguistic influence. All habitative names in this category are discussed, with a whole chapter devoted to place-names containing the important generic  $-b\acute{y}$  (Canonbie, Denbie and Lockerbie are typical Dumfries-shire examples) as well as names that originated as topographical names. Further chapters are devoted to hybrid names containing the Old English generic  $t\bar{u}n$ , and there is a discussion on the way in which the Vikings treated pre-existing British and English names. Finally, there are chapters on distribution and dating.